

The Federal Poet

Spring 2006



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THE FEDERAL POETS

9039 Sligo Creek Parkway #1409, Silver Spring MD 20901
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Introduction

THE FEDERAL POETS is the oldest continuously active poetry group in the Washington D.C. area. First convened in 1944, it is a nonprofit organization open to all poets without regard to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or political affiliation.

Members of **THE FEDERAL POETS** meet at the West End Public Library in Washington, DC, on the third Saturday of every month to read, analyze and discuss their poetry. Visitors are always welcome. Members and visitors who are planning to attend should bring 20 copies of a recently written poem for distribution to those present. The poem will then be discussed with a view to enhancing its chances for publication.

The chief aims of this organization are to improve the members' poems by the exchange of constructive criticism and to increase their exposure through publication and readings.

The Federal Poet, containing the best poems written by members, is published semiannually. Local and corresponding members receive it and may submit poems to the editor for consideration and publication.

THE FEDERAL POETS is a chapter of the **National Federation of State Poetry Societies** and the **Academy of American Poets** and is also affiliated with the **Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines**.

For membership information, write us or visit our website.

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President, Federal Poets: Nancy Allinson
Vice President: Judith McCombs
Treasurer: H. Alexander

Managing Editor, The Federal Poet: Pam Coulter Blehert
Publication design and typesetting: Words & Pictures East Coast
Cover Design & cover art: Pam Coulter Blehert
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Bedtime

in the boarding house
of the imagination
all the lights are on

Stephen Russell

Hilda's Speeches on This Earth: a Five-Part Sequence

1.

Hilda lay in hospital
(this was a long long time ago)
& there she got her carcass poked
& spied upon & nudged & doped.
She budged her not. She like it where she was,
that endless hum, the red-brown lull,
that superwaterbed. In her good time,

in her good time, no shoving now,
she took a lazy somersault,
engaged her helmet bones,
& like a long high pass she lobbed on through
to life & various indignities
where she did not consent.

Puffed & skinny in the glass
she eyes herself these days & asks
just what she's got that's worth a fuss?
Her breath, a beer—so who gets more?
The mirror knows you gotta play for keeps.

2.

What losses Hilda suffered
so've others, some comfort that.
Listen: view Halloo for youth, for faith
ambition license innocence—
the universe can have the perfect plastic purse,
the only aunt she loved, the three snitched socks—

but where's that kid who flagged the glittering silver bus
beneath the empty sky, the lava buttes,
& swung her life aboard
60 miles an hour gone
not fast enough—where was she headed for?
Where's the neon promises believed?

Subtract her, mile by mile,
job by job & guy by aging guy,
& once a brat that got away—

subtract it all—& where's the squinty kid
who grabbed the handle of the world?
The buttes are testing grounds.
The road's a freeway & it's full.
She's not herself.

3.

Hilda's pelt was put on sundry rugs,
carseats, beds, & (once) a tessellated floor,
which compensated for
backsliding tendencies, by friction of
its hexagons, & for excess of touch
spread pleasing cool.

There was a man, of her own heart, that night,
content to settle for this world as is—
a real live miracle
was he, wearing skin & liking it
(& halleluiah not a marblephile
descending to the tiles).

Glad Hilda laughed beneath the rattling knob—
whoever said that dames & mares were sad
was male—& also had
no spunk himself, projecting stuff like that.
When Hilda was inside this hide, she came
for fun, & liked the ride.

4.

The seat was up & Hilda fell in love
up to her neck, & she was one wet cat,
sad eyes & pointy fur
& tears & bilge filled up her nose.
& this went on for weeks, she got no sleep
no food no ease, she pined just like in books,

her ribs poked through like she was scalped.
She stood in parties glaring like an Indian
*How dare those persons crowd her earth
& not be him?* At other corners waiting
Where's his step his glance
she fell along his swath with uplift glaze

shaky hands & tremulous spine oh bliss!
Her insides dropt away for joy
& in his shadow she could float
& in the memory of his shade what brightness dwelt
 what nights
what shit. Slowly & ungraciously
Hilda's climbing out. The porcelain hurts her claws.

5.

Joe was the best of them.
In forty years, some legal & most not,
there's five or six were better lays—
the artist-type with sad slow exit lines
months before she left him drunk in Wichita—
he put in it a song, what good is that?

There's Larry looked the cleanest, was most deft—
he came down easy as a clamshell platen press
can kiss the type—a joy to watch him work
no matter who upon—
& that supermusclebound Marine j.d.
who could've posed & might as well,
for all she ever got—

Joe was the warmest & the best.
He held her up. A gentleness
that made her hungry, kept her fed—
it's not in books
& she can't hold it in her hands, alone.
Ten years he's dead. The time goes faster when you're old.

Judith McCombs

Reprinted from Judith McCombs, *Sisters & Other Selves*
(Detroit, MI: Glass Bell Press, 1976); also in *We Become New:
Poems by Contemporary American Women*, ed. Lucille Iverson
and Kathryn Ruby, (New York: Bantam, 1973); and *Not Just
Air*, an on-line literary journal, www.sundress.net/notjustair.

Sketch of an Astronaut

I've wondered how far a man in a spacesuit
can go in this little town, shaped for sleepy
farmers and teens with buckets of turnips,
who throw them off trucks at crowds of children.
He has his own source of oxygen, so the smoke
of Cuban cigars at the lodge or the gray clouds
over the daily book burnings don't tear up his eyes
or roll him over into a waiting line of coffins.
Making so much of his big leaps at hopscotch, he
plants flags in the housewives' petunias and plays
golf among the asphalt potholes, disappointed
the ball skips across lawns and fails to soar.
When he chaperones the prom with our youngest teacher
he buzzes his words through the white helmet,
dwarfs her hands with his insulated gloves, and
doesn't feel the hot pink lipstick through his visor.
The neighbors find his boot prints, large steps
for a man, at two in the morning outside their launch
pads, where the astronaut creates explosive sounds
with his mouth inside space cars that won't fire.
Before he leaves he sits in a chair at the ladies'
auxiliary, who a week ago drew their first naked man.
No matter how much they plead the suit stays on.
Around his massive head they sketch the stars.

Donald Illich

Sketch of an Astronaut was originally published in
"The Iowa Review," Vo1. 35, No. 2, Fall 2005 issue.

A VOICE ON THE RADIO ASKS

*Given magic powers, would you
choose the gift of flight, or that of invisibility?*
The sky outside is vastly blue. I imagine
pushing off my floor and floating upward
as I do from the blue bottom of a pool,
watching first my legs dissolve, then hips, then ribs.
I want to have both gifts, to hover just above
tree level, unseen, but comprehending all that I observe.

I think this is how souls arrive
as they practice reincarnation.
Returning to the world, peering
into birthing windows, curious and brave.
They've been sitting on a celestial bench,
chins in palms, and suddenly one says,
It's my turn next.

A deep breath, and down she swoops.
She feels the gravity of corporeal life
as she draws closer, the weight of karmic tasks.
Souls know what they're getting into,
slipping past a ragged cry
into the birth-wet skin.
So she chooses these parents,
this life with its labors and betrayals,
its dusty towns, the books
she'll have to read, the lovers and the losses.

I imagine her reporting back
on how it's gone, the balancing
of karmic books. In ancient Egypt
the god Anubis weighed
each corpse's heart, placing it

on a scale opposite a feather,
testing its owner's virtue.
Here, between clouds,
she too answers to a disembodied
voice. Already she's forgotten
the nakedness of being seen, the density
of hands on skin, the metallic smell of blood.

Ann Rayburn

Misanthrope

a stake in the heart
of the SUV,
actually a nail,
and, no, it wasn't me

Lee Giesecke

Soup

Tired of seeing the ground?
Look at the sky of blue.
Spin me, spin me around,
Make my emotions true

Make them soft and tender
Beat them into a pulp
Put them through a blender
And pour into a cup

Set it upon a stove
And simmer and boil
Put in, well-cut, a clove,
Pour in some olive oil

Pour in cayenne and cumin
Pour in pepper and salt.
Tonight for dinner, a human -
Excellent plan to a fault.

Drink this turbid mixture
And when you're nurtured well
Take a beautiful picture
And renew your spell.

Ilya Shambat

Paeon to Spoons

THIS spoon,
this is a wonderful spoon,
nice wooden handle
fixed to genuine stainless steel throughout,
big spoon bowl etched with:
one teaspoon, two teaspoons,
one tablespoon, two tablespoons,
meant for ladling,
big enough for a soup pot,
stew pot, casserole.

THIS spoon, now,
this spoon — big but slim —
made for digging into
hard ice cream
pulling out slices, nuggets, chunky monkey.
This is a wonderful spoon.

Now THIS spoon, this spoon
is small enough for my mouth,
small enough for stirring coffee,
eating yogurt, cottage cheese and fruit,
ice cream dipped with *that* spoon but
which you want to eat slowly...

but too small for soup.
My god! You'd never finish!
Soup spoon, lovely soup spoon,
let me not forget you.

Spoons!

Pam Blehert

President Putin Ponders Predicts

prods
plagiarizes
prays
procrastinates

plunders part-time
precludes
prejudices
pities
plumbs
praises
presents
probes
prognosticates
prohibits
propels
proposes
provokes
purports
purrs

piffle

Hunter Alexander

Fatslug in the Fourth Grade

"Hey FATSLUG," yells Fat
Sandra, surrounded
by her harpy cronies.
"There's a new girl here
who wants to meetcha!"

The harpies seize
Fatslug, and claw
by hideous claw, drag him
over to where the pale
new girl fades into the wall.

"Hello," he says,
holding out his hand.

The pale girl cringes
as from a gargoyle.

Fat Sandra's laughter
resounds through the centuries.

Miles David Moore

"Fatslug in the Fourth Grade" was originally published in
Poetry Motel and later appeared in *The Bears of Paris*

OOPS

Once I met a man with a pacemaker
he said he couldn't get too excited
so we tried
blew out his battery
and he died.

Averille E. Jacobs

An A-Lion Dress

A young maiden, on meeting a lion,
Said "This day is too pleasant to die on,"
So she shot the beast dead,
Skinned his hide off and said,
"You are someone I've long meant to try on!"

Said the maiden, "I'm glad he's so brawny,
"For I can't stand a lion who's scrawny,
"For my build's rather buxom.
"Now I'll nip some and tuck some,
"And I'll soon be a vision in tawny!"

"See! It matches my tan – no denyin'
"That I'm now a sight strong men will sigh on!"
Then she tripped on her tail,
Snagged her mane on a nail...
But she's doing quite well at Mt. Zion.

Dean Blehert

A Moonless Night in June

Anhedonic, dissipative, easily stunned:
a product of substances and processes
already so familiar, they defy metaphor.
Smelling like a patient, wet
around the fingers and ears, I offer no inflection
only information and prediction.
I taste like recycled paper
bedded down with bad ink.
I eavesdrop on the wind:
this always helps me think.
Wind stirs soft evening like a drink,
it awakens my thirst.
and paves the way
for this last part
which will never
come in first.

Blair Ewing

The Emptying Nest

Pam and I are beginning to deal with empty nest syndrome, now that my childhood is roaming Wyoming and Montana as a renowned cowboy-Indian-detective; while Pam's childhood is happily married to the prince of a small, scenic nation in a misty corner of Europe.

My youth is also self-supporting now – just barely. He doesn't often write, but last we heard, he was living alone in a cabin in the Northern woods, without phone, TV or radio, working on honing his perfect mind while sitting for hours in full Lotus.

Pam's youth is hitching and hosteling around the world, painting water buffalos and cathedrals, learning the dirty words in exotic languages and mailing us amusing, nicotine-stained postcards that bemoan with many underlined words her latest lost lover or enthuse over her newest.

My maturity is just getting established (we still store boxes of his stuff in our garage). His wife and kids are settling into a large flat in London, from which he travels to Oxford, Cambridge, etc., researching his "big book" on the evidence for alternate universes, all this financed by a MacArthur Grant.

Pam's maturity has realized a long-time dream: She has a big, beautiful house, plus two wooded acres all to herself. Hell, her studio is as big as our whole house. She lives off the booming sales of her paintings and is having a ball decorating: She just finished painting the living room walls glossy black and the ceiling flaming orange.

It's a relief, really, having them all on their own, leaving us to rattle around in our suddenly spacious little house; but it's awfully quiet, maybe too quiet, especially during these holidays. Fortunately we still have our cat and our old selves to take care of until they, too, are ready to move out.

Dean Blehert

The Raven Bar & Grill

"Blehert hasn't had an unpublished thought in years,"
I tell my bartender.
"Blehert, what kind of name is that for a poet, " the guy
sitting next to me says.
"Ever read Bukowski." "Everyone's read Bukowski."
"You should read
more of him," the guy sitting next to me says. "What
are you, a funny guy or something?"
"Blehert, is he a funny guy?" my bartender says. "He
thinks he is." "Blehert,
what kind of name is that for a poet," the guy sitting
next to me says.

The most beautiful woman in Mount Pleasant walks in
the bar and sits next
to me. She's pure GOTH. Wicked green eyes, black
leather gloves, and fishnet
black stockings covering legs you'd garrote your only
son to get your hands on.
"You look alot like Bukowski," she says. "But you're
smaller, and cute."
"Cute, haven't heard that one before." " Ever read
Blehert," she says. "Yeah.
He thinks Chandler's better than Hemingway and he
hasn't had an unpublished thought."
"You've read my mind," she says, tipping the bartender.

"What kind of name is Blehert?" a guy at the end of the
bar says. "What's it to you?"
I say. The chair once occupied by the most beautiful
woman in Mount Pleasant
is empty. The jukebox belches Billy Joel. I order another
draft.

Stephen Russell

A Black Ceiling Hemmed in by Burning Stars

Yesterday I saw Estonia
by bicycle and balloon,
by jetplane and lorry,
crawling on my belly,
and riding on the roof of the city.
I saw an old man reading Liiv in his basement
and a young girl standing on one foot
looking at the moon through a crack in her front door.
Today, I watched the last star falling,
and in the still morning,
I danced like a hungry dog,
prowling through mean streets near the city center;
lured by the stench of boiled sour cabbage and greasy sausage,
lured by the metallic taste of cheap coffee roasted with chicory,
drawn to where dry laundry hung in a wet courtyard,
the pavement slick with sewer water from backed-up pipes,
I saw a skinny woman hung by her lengthening neck,
suspended from a sunny window filled with azalea blossoms.
Later, in the lengthening day,
behind the Baltic Railway Station,
I overheard heated whispers on lovers' lips -
and gypsy music from a blind poet,
and regi poetry from a sweating dissident,
and cursing from a fat woman in an empty butcher's shop,
and crying from a syphilitic commissar,
I overheard a dirty Azerbaijani woman selling dead flowers
to an American,
overheard a beautiful teenager in a black leather miniskirt,
sitting in a darkened bar with a funny name I don't remember,
she was selling her smooth, round thighs,
her perfect unslung breasts and her aquamarine eyes;
she was selling herself
to a drunken Finn with white eyelashes and red eyes.
From every speaker, from every mouth, on every tongue,
I overheard the disgorged soul of all their language,
rising and falling and crashing,
a cacophony of unknown epithets to my foreign ears,
a tidal wave of Estonian speech
breaking on my beaches and shores.

(more)

At twilight,
down by the seawall,
I saw white seagulls wheeling over Tallinn town
looking for fish,
while far above in heaven,
I saw silver warplanes glinting in the soundless sky
looking for fish.
And this evening just after twilight,
I saw a black ceiling hemmed in by burning stars,
a black ceiling above our hearts and our time.

Kevin Michael Reilly

I AM POed

Today I am pissed.
I'll be prissy with someone.
A prissy insult from me will
awaken their prissiness.

That someone will become pissed.
He'll snap at someone.
Perhaps a colleague,
a friend, anyone.

Once home, that person will yell
at their unsuspecting spouse.
She'll be short
with the kiddies.

The oldest will pinch the youngest.
The youngest will kick the dog.
The dog will bite the baby-sitter.
The baby-sitter will curse God.

The baby-sitter's curse
will awaken God.
The universe will disappear
'cause I am pissed.

Averille E. Jacobs

GENOME

It rides inside me—sequenced
for me alone, so I'm not a fruit fly
or a mustard weed.

One day a secret will be revealed,
a heart attack or cancer. I'll be thrown off
like a corn husk.

A way of talking across eons
in the biosphere through encoded flickering messages
from one organism to others.

Spiral chains of proteins
float, their tiny lights blinking on and off
in the moving night.

Martin Dickinson

HOMAGE TO EUCLID

What points are these,
dots of imagination showing the invisible

and what lines
reaching beyond the page to infinity?

Here's a music of objects:
rhomboid, oblong, parallelogram,

rhapsody of postulates, with space
for basilicas, grids of towns, to be filled in later.

Here's the circle, here the sphere
and all the white space that surrounds them

with room enough
for worlds

Martin Dickinson

URBAN FLORA

Yuccas

bunches of blades
guard the bank
menacing the sidewalk

uncanny plants
with tough spine-tipped narrow leaves
troughed out like long canoes
and launched upon the air
prows bristling

stalks of plumlike fruits
hang in soft wrinkled purplish white ripening bags
above the leaf-spikes:

vulnerable looking bags of fruit

like disemboweled organs
or men's ball sacs

dangling above upthrust barbarous spears
like trophies

High Noon

the flock sweeps into the city
hives in the leafhead of an oak
and from its shadowy oasis
dispenses song

then bursts forth to seed the sky
and shoal off into the clouds

leaving the tree--
shorn of its minstrelsy and dwarfed
by the brute monotony of a seven-tiered
parking garage slabbed up against the sky--
to shag the air
with a more uncanny green

Charles Gerald DuBose, Jr.

yucca: any of a genus (*Yucca*) of plants of the agave family, having stiff, sword-shaped leaves and white flowers in an erect raceme, found in the U.S. and Latin America and frequently planted as an ornamental in urban settings

Who Knew

for Eric

Who knew that the leaves
would blossom in winter?

Or the earth shift
like a davening Jew.

That the moon would be
an incubator?

That God eavesdrops
on children's prayers.

Or that we would be the blessing
to make God cry for joy.

Marjorie Sadin

THE OLD DAIRY FARMER

We grabbed the glistening gallon jug, a quarter
From the counter, let the screen door slam
Behind us
And headed for the dairy farm to pick up that
Wholesome, nourishing, warm foamy
Nasty milk.

YUK!
Disgusting to my notion! In fact, I gagged
When that warm stuff oozed down my throat—

But, as we walked, my thoughts were far from
Milk, I was entertaining my sisters with Carmen
Miranda antics—skinny hips swaggering and
Swaying down the hill while the gallon jug
Bobbled precariously on my head.

At the bottom of the hill, we turned into the
Driveway and headed for the barn
But first we had to pass by
The Old Dairy Farmer.
He was always sitting on the porch steps—
Coughing spitting squinting wheezing while
Watching our every move.

We mouthed a silent “hello” he rarely answered—
Just stared. I tried not to look at him—
I was scared stiff of him—
Teeth missing, matted hair, same old plaid shirt.
Subconsciously, I wished he would die.

One day we turned the corner—and he wasn’t
Sitting on the steps. My eyes nervously darted
Around the yard. No sign of him—hooray!
Greatly relieved we made a beeline for the
Barn—

The family was congregated there, quietly
Milking the cows, straining milk, filling milk
Cans and carrying out their chores. They told us
In hushed voices that Grandpa had died.

My mind began racing. My wish had been
Granted, but now I was really terrified.
I knew I was to blame.
I was so ashamed I couldn't look
Anyone in the eye.

I prayed it was a mistake.
I prayed he would be sitting there next time.
I prayed for forgiveness.
I prayed for everything.
But he never came back.

Norrene Vogt

Remembering Her

It may happen like this. I am ill
for the last time, or simply old
and out of new cells. My unsteady
heart writes lines of jazz music
on the hospital monitor – green
and glowing, and disappearing.
My memories surface like bubbles
from the mouth of one already
drifting down deep, and again
I fall in love. If it is autumn
in Tennessee like when I first
walked with Sarah, I'll see
maple leaves fall by the millions.
Millions of old women's hands –
full of knowing, soft to the touch,
withering, and soon to pass.

Mark Dawson

Dollar Store Love

When you go bargain hunting
In Love's Big Shopping Mall,
What you say
Is what You get,
You create it all!

Whoa Nellie! Wait a minute!
You mean I asked for all of that?
Mohammed, Fred and Charlie,
and that low-down Jimmy Mack?

Honey-baby heal your thinking,
I've said it all before.
Can't blame the brothers sweetie
Cause by now you know the score.

You'll never get a Gucci bag
When you shop at the Dollar Store!

Marjorie "Imani" Young

Crows

Three
large
black
birds
screeching
looming like
fate's shadows
threatening my peace

Two
large
black
birds
tearing at
the remains of
what traffic had left
of the young squirrel that
ran across this morning's
busy highway

One
large
black
crow
hidden by the green
waiting in the branches
of the silent tree

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

I am Bird

I am bird.
My profession is falling.
Down the long sweep of the mountain side
where climbers cling sweating, I glide.
Meat in my talons, wind in my beak
I am light as the sunshine. In the breeze,
my feathers twitch. I am not cold.
These apes who have taken over the land,
I shit on them.
I am bird.

Pam Coulter Blehert

Cover art: Cherry Blossoms at Hains Point by Coulter